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Scarcity of Bread.

A P L A N

FOR REDUCING
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IN

A L E T T E R

ADDRESSED BY

WILLIAM FRENCH,

TO

WILLIAM DEVAYNES, Esq.

*Chairman of the Meeting at the London Tavern July 14,
to consider of the present high price of Provisions.*

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SIR,

IN the present state of public affairs, every honest man feels an anxiety for the welfare of his country. The prospect before us is alarming, but it becomes us to meet the approaching evils with fortitude. We shall do this by enquiring into the real cause of these evils, by removing that cause, and alleviating to the utmost of our power, the bad effects which it has produced.

I will

I will not say that the meeting of which you were the chairman, on the 14th of July, has declared a falsehood to the world; but you must permit me to point out to you in what it has been deficient, and to shew you that it has erred greatly, by not speaking out boldly the whole truth. The meeting in its report declares, that "A short produce from the harvest of last year, an ungenial spring and weather exceedingly unfavourable to the hope of an early harvest, have created a serious apprehension, that the country has not a sufficient stock of wheat till the coming harvest."

This is a part only of the true causes of the present scarcity. A bad harvest, an ungenial spring, and an unfavourable summer, have happened before in this country, without creating such an alarm as the present; and in different external circumstances the same inconvenience would not have been felt. The fact is, that you have left out the material article from which the scarcity arises: the war—the war is the chief cause of our distress. Whether you omitted this article from the fear of offending men, who are by many supposed to be the authors of all the present calamities, or whether you were afraid of telling the people this truth, lest they should join with one heart and one voice in demanding a speedy end to be put to the horrors of this war—such, or any other motive, can hardly excuse you to the public for omitting to state the chief cause of our present distress.

By correcting your report, you may regain the confidence of the public. State fairly the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. The causes of the present distress are the war, and the short produce from the last year's harvest. The apprehension of its long continuance arises from the late ungenial spring, and unseasonable weather, which give us reason to believe that this year's harvest will be a late one. The war has occasioned the
scarcity

scarcity by destroying the usual supplies of corn to this country, and by sending immense quantities out of the country. The usual supplies of foreign corn have been stopped, both because our neighbours the French (for I hold it blasphemy against the God of Nature, to call any men our natural enemies), were competitors with us for the corn of America; and Poland the great granary of Europe, has been in too distracted a state to supply both us and the immense armies kept on foot by the Princes of Germany.

Who then have occasioned this scarcity? Ourselves! except those, and there are, I trust, many thousands among us, who can conscientiously appeal to the God of Heaven, and declare that they have always testified their abhorrence of the war. They who have not done this, must be content to hear that they have been the means of bringing on, in some degree, the present scarcity. They who have encouraged the war, who have offered their lives and fortunes in support of this war, are now bound in honour to come forward, and alleviate, with the fortunes which they offered, that distress which they have partly occasioned.

The mean of alleviating this distress is, if the heart is willing, easy to be found. The weekly consumption of corn in London, I understand to be about 20,000 quarters, of which at least 5,000 quarters are consumed by persons of sufficient property not to require relief from their neighbours. The other 15,000 quarters, I shall suppose to be consumed by persons in circumstances to require this relief: and as this allowance is probably much too large, my calculation will give relief to every person in real want. The corn may rise to five pounds the quarter. I will suppose it at that price; and consequently a sum of money must be raised to produce, at this rate, a sufficient quantity of corn or other food. Fifteen thousand quarters, at 5*l.* cost
75,000*l.*

75,000l. A weekly supply of food at this price may be wanted to the middle of October ; and we will go on the presumption, that food for persons in inferior circumstances at a cheap rate will be wanted for twelve weeks. According to the above calculation, this food will cost twelve times 75,000l, or 900,000l. This goes upon the idea, that the corn is to be given away : but it is evident, that among the consumers of the 15,000 quarters of wheat, there are many, who can afford to pay something for their sustenance, and of course a much smaller sum will be sufficient to provide for their wants.

The sum of 75,000l. only is therefore immediately wanted. With this money, corn or any substitute for it may be purchased from the dealers in the different articles ; but bread is the first thing required, and the first thing to be attended to. Let there be made then lists of persons in the different districts of London, who stand in need of assistance. Let orders be given to the bakers for supplying these persons with a certain quantity of bread at eight-pence, six-pence, four-pence, and two-pence, for the loaf which now costs a shilling ; and let each person be directed to the baker nearest to him, who shall be bound to give these persons bread of the finest quality that can be made. For the rich man may do well with bread of an inferior quality ; but they, who cannot purchase meat, ought to have the greater quantity of sustenance in the articles which they do consume. The difference between the price paid by the consumer, and the legal assize, is to be made up out of the fund, which by these means in the course of a week will be decreased, probably to about 30,000l. for the second week, 45,000l. must be raised, and so to the end of the twelve weeks ; and thus 570,000l. will be sufficient to relieve us from all our alarms. Now considering the sum lately given to the Prince of Wales, we may reasonably presume that parliament will not refuse to grant

grant the whole, or part of this sum for the relief of several hundred thousand persons in real distress.

But supposing that parliament will not give any assistance, a call may reasonably be made on those, who lately volunteered their lives and fortunes in one of the city halls. I understand that there were present at that meeting 1,500 merchants, among whom were some worth several hundred thousand pounds: and I might probably affront every one there, if I should say that any one was worth less than 2,000l. Let a request then be made to these gentlemen, to contribute a twentieth part of their fortunes towards the relief of their poorer neighbours: no one will then contribute less than 100l. and some will give from 10 to 20,000l. As the whole sum will not be immediately wanted, their contributions may be paid by instalments: thus, a payment of ten per cent. for the first contribution will raise more than the first 75,000l. and probably at the end of the twelve weeks, the poorest merchant will not have been called upon for more than fifty pounds.

Now, if we were to call upon the poorest merchant for a 100l. never to be repaid, I do not conceive, that, in point of honour, he would think himself justifiable in refusing this relief to his countrymen, to whose welfare he has devoted his life and fortune. But we do not request him even to give this small sum: the loan of it only is wanted, and he will probably be repaid the whole or the greater part. This repayment will depend upon an application to parliament; and according to the sum voted by parliament, to the relief of the distressed inhabitants of London, the share contributed by each merchant will be diminished.

I have now shewn you an easy mean for providing for our distresses; and every apprehension of calamity may be removed by the wisdom and fortitude of the persons co-operating on the present occasion.

Broad,

Bread, and other articles of food must be purchased of the proper venders of these commodities, and retailed according to a proper method in the different districts; every good citizen should be called upon for his assistance; and the greatest attention should be paid to the wants of every individual.

But something more is wanted than temporary relief. The minds of the citizens are alarmed, and no man can say that there is not just reason for alarm in the heart of every Englishman. There are said to be houses in and about this great city, into which Englishmen are seduced, and then confined in chains. These houses are called crimping-houses; and there is such a detestation in the mind of every good citizen, against this infringement of his brother's rights, that unless proper steps are taken by persons in authority to put an end to such abominable actions, it cannot be wondered at, if the zeal of English Liberty should at times exceed the bounds of English Prudence. Hence there have been meetings of the people, by whom houses suspected to be concerned in this outrage on humanity have been burnt; and soldiers have been called in, to——but I will say no more—I am an Englishman. I recommend, therefore, to your meeting, to make a resolution, that it considers all men as the enemies of their country, who are either the seducers of our poor countrymen into these houses, or the masters of these houses, and consequently responsible for the enormities committed in them, or the employers in any shape of the wicked men engaged in this trade; and that it will do the utmost in its power to bring these men to public justice.

Thus the minds of the people will be quieted, and a great point will be gained by establishing the confidence which should subsist between citizen and citizen; for at present it grieves me to hear frequently in the streets, expressions which imply that many of my fellow countrymen in poorer circumstances

cumstances think themselves neglected or oppressed by the higher classes.

But this is not all which may be expected from you in this time of distress. It is not the price of corn only, which produces it: every other article has risen in proportion; and the poor man's wages are not adequate to the supply of the wants of a numerous family. A poor man besides bread, wants, cheese, beer, shoes, soap, candles, and many other articles, all of which, by means of taxes, are enormously raised in their prices; and it becomes the State to consider well, whether a better mode of supply may not be found than that, by which the poor man is now made to pay more than his share to the expences of government. For in estimating this real proportion, we are to consider not only what each man pays out of his annual income to government, but what remains after this payment is made. Thus, suppose one man to receive for the labour of himself and family in one year 50l. and another 5,000l. ask yourselves the question, what should each man pay to the government of his country. If in the family of the former there should be ten persons, in that of the latter only five, the consumption of the former in bread, soap, beer, shoes, &c. &c. will bear a much greater proportion to his annual income than that of the latter; and consequently the poorer man pays a much greater proportion, by means of taxes, of his annual income than the latter: but the reverse of this ought to take place; the richer man ought to pay in the greater proportion; and as yet sufficient attention has not been paid to this principle in taxation.

I beg leave, therefore, to recommend to your meeting, to petition the king to call together his parliament, to consider the real state of the country, to grant sufficient supplies to relieve our distresses, and to enquire after some means to lower the price of the necessary articles of life. I am
convinced

convinced in my own mind, that a better substitute may be found to raise the supplies necessary in a wise government, than by taxes on beer, soap, leather, malt, candles, and other things requisite to the poor man, and should therefore recommend the immediate abolition of these taxes; but others may be of a different opinion; and if by your means parliament should be led to a full investigation of this question, you will have done an essential service to your country.

I make no apology for troubling you with this letter; for I should not have written it, but under the idea of performing the duty of a good citizen; and with this impression on my mind I shall not scruple to offer to you the future services of

Your fellow countryman,

W. FRENCH.

INNER TEMPLE,

Wednesday, July 15, 1795.

